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THE ORIGINALITY OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI*

By PAUL SABATIER

I did not intend to deliver an oratorical panegyric; nothing is further from my thought. I should like to have all of us alike get beyond the region of æsthetic and intellectual admiration, and reach the level of personal, sympathetic emotion.

I want to allow St. Francis himself to speak. Of course the subject which we are discussing to-day could never possibly have presented itself to his mind. He would have been pained beyond measure if his originality had been mentioned to him, for his chief aim was to repress in himself all originality.

From the first moment of his spiritual life; from the time of the famous vision at St. Damian, when kneeling before the crucifix, he heard the mysterious appeal deep down in his heart showing him the way he had to go: "Francis, go and repair My House, for thou seest it falleth in ruins"—from then on to the day, when stretched naked on the bare earth of Portioncula, he returned to God, while the brethren chanted psalms, and the nightingales sang their songs—always, it can be said, that every instant he was striving for depersonalization. The Imitation of Jesus Christ was his constant preoccupation. But is it not plain that when one reaches these depths of personality the Christ with which we are dealing is no longer the Jesus of history, but rather the ideal figure whom St. Paul called the second Adam—an expression marvellous for its laconic brevity? There are two men in us—not two men in constant struggle, as is frequently represented—one the truth, the other a lie; one good, the other evil; one God Himself, the other the devil. It may be these points of view can explain what takes place in us in those solemn moments when our conscience stands hesitating at the parting of the ways, one road before us ascending, the other leading downward. But there are normal circumstances when this comparison fails to answer to facts. Speaking in a

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natural sense, there is only one man in us, in biblical language, the old Adam. The whole effort of religion is the creation in us of the new Adam. Here is the mystery of the new birth.

He who has come to understand this, not only intellectually, but in his heart and will, is the new creature. It makes little difference at which stage he may be, he is progressing. Conscience in this way must come to be master of itself; if it is Christian, it must make this effort in Christ; that is to say it evokes first His historic *persona* and communes with Him in spirit. It often fails to recognize that in seeking Christ, it finds itself and creates its better self. Here, it may be said, is just the point where St. Francis is original. His effort to imitate Christ brought him to realize in a perfect degree his own personality without his being at all conscious that he had found himself.

But it would be impossible for us to keep on such an elevation as this. Poetry and music alone are able to unveil these secrets of the soul. Let it be enough to indicate the idea I have in mind, and let us try to study, not the originality of St. Francis from this isolated point of view, but under its most striking aspect.

Will you allow me, gentlemen, to confess to you that I have a rather ungenerous idea in my mind? I think I can perceive from the movement of your lips, from the expression in your eyes, that you are asking yourselves a question. Perhaps some of you regret that I have not answered it already for you. Am I mistaken in thinking that when this lecture was announced, or perhaps even when I began, you asked yourselves, "Whom or what is he going to attack?" It is true at the present day we have got into the habit of seeing our contemporaries arrange themselves according to their hatreds rather than according to their predilections. The necessity of being in opposition to some one or something is, perhaps, the most unpleasant tendency of the day. You will find nothing of this kind in what I propose to say. We will try to get inspiration from the example of St. Francis, who is essentially a peacemaker. Having peace in himself, he took it with him everywhere.

Yet we should make a mistake if we thought of him as going

about redressing wrongs like a kind of judge, rather more enlightened than the rest, a man who upheld the good and condemned the bad. Legends present him as going to towns and villages and re-establishing public peace. Do not make the mistake of thinking that he had the parties brought before him, that he spent time hearing their complaints, that he took much trouble apportioning to each one his deserts. Do not imagine, too, that by a sort of miracle his decision came to him by inspiration. No! there is nothing true in such suppositions. At the sight of him, his hearers forgot their quarrels. In an instant, they were drawn into that serene and salutary region where the air is so pure and so life-giving that they felt new strength given them, where they saw that there was so much to do that the idea of losing time in miserable and petty squabbles did not even enter their minds.

I wish this were so to-day. We should go calmly along our way, greeting those we meet on the right hand and on the left; we should go into the fields, too, along the road to shake hands with hardy laborers at work there; perhaps we would guide their plow for a moment so that they could rest awhile. If some one barred our path we would try to pass on in humility, even asking pardon. Francis of Assisi used to ask pardon even of robbers; he even thought that if the Wolf of Gubbio made a habit of devouring people and cattle, that was no reason to treat it discourteously.

The great originality of St. Francis was his Catholicism. But what in St. Francis' case constitutes originality, is that he was a Catholic of a type never seen before his time, and of which there are very few specimens after his time, at least among the men whose history we know.

Do not be alarmed, do not think that I am going to try to say that the Poverello's Catholicism was original, individual and peculiar. A Catholicism which was leaning towards schism or heresy is quite contrary to my thought. It was a Catholicism very different from the kind we commonly know; but not because it took a direction different from that of the strictest orthodoxy, but because it went so far in this direction that we are hardly able with our sight to follow its course.

It often happens on Alpine excursions that we see in front of us, on a height far above, near the summit, some one who started before we did. We are apt to imagine that this traveller did not follow the ordinary path, that he took another one hidden in the brushwood. And we find that while we are searching for this supposed path, we allow the distance to increase which separates us from those who are really harder walkers than we are.

So it is with the Catholicism of St. Francis. If it bears only a very slight resemblance to the Catholicism which we see disseminated about us, the reason is not that he gave it an impoverished form or emptied it of its significance. On the contrary, it is infinitely richer, more fruitful, and more conscious of its power.

Now you understand why I hesitate to associate the term "orthodoxy" with the name of St. Francis. This expression, it is obvious, has something juridical and external about it. What would you think of a man and wife who only tried to keep the bare terms of their marriage contract in obedience to the articles of the legal code? From the point of view of law nothing could be said against them. Yet it is clear that no real and profound love existed between them; and even an intense interest in observing the written law would in itself constitute a sufficient proof of all absence of love.

It is the same in religious things. When care for the letter saturates our life, it marks a feeble and infirm faith, even if it does not indicate its entire absence. This fact is what caused St. Paul to utter the immortal saying: "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." My meaning can be made plain by a parallel. What does it mean to be a citizen of a country? Is it being born in it? It is quite possible as the result of special circumstances to be born in a country we really do not belong to. Is it living in it? Is it paying taxes, I mean money taxes and blood taxes? Is it enjoying the civil rights of the country?—observing its laws? Clearly the person who has all of these claims on a country is, from the legal point of view, a perfect citizen, an orthodox citizen; but can we say that these items exhaust the whole significance of the idea of a citizen?

From the legal point of view, this catalogue certainly means a good deal; spiritually it has almost no significance. The citizen is a man who feels that he is a member of an immense family, which he does not indeed know, which he will never know; a family which goes back thousands of years, from whom he has received innumerable benefits, to which he is bound by ever enduring obligations. The citizen is a man who, recognizing the enormous efforts accomplished before his day, wishes to participate in them; and to continue them he does not keep a ledger account of what he owes, of what he receives; he never thinks of putting his troubles in commercial equation, and he does not hesitate to sacrifice himself. The legal and pagan idea of property which still marks our legal code, may appear to him provisionally necessary, corresponding to a certain stage of civilization. But in his soul and conscience he feels that he has passed beyond it. He feels literally responsible and accountable to his fellow citizens for the use of his time, his position, his strength, his talents.

In a word, the citizen is a man who abiding on the soil where he was born, realizes that he has special obligations to it, loves it first because it is the land which nursed him, whence he drew his material life; then he learns to love it, gradually, more actively, more religiously, because it is the soil which has produced most of his duties and responsibilities. The moment, when after receiving all these gifts from his home, he learns to give his whole self to it, is the time when he can claim the privilege of murmuring the sweet word which inspired in your Alighieri such deep emotions — the sacred words, "My country." A good citizen is a man who develops all his individual energies, his physical powers, his intellectual, moral faculties, and who in this constant effort neither feels that he is working alone nor is foolish enough to wish to work by and for himself.

We appear to be very far away now from St. Francis; really we are very near him, for all of these things were the inspirations of his life. You know with what jealousy he advised his disciples not to take anything for themselves; although they were called mendicants and they deserved the name, and from that time on they have never ceased to deserve it. But accord-

ing to the purpose of St. Francis, the Brother Minors were not a mendicant order, they were an order of workers.

It can be said that in him and through him the Church tried to eliminate gradually the old pagan notion of property. The plan did not succeed, the effort soon came to an end. But those who believe that a great society can only advance by slow degrees, that even before marking out its path, it has to make experiments, draw plans, put down stakes, will see how Franciscan preaching was a sort of rough mapping out of a new world and the preface to a new civilization which has not even yet come into being. While we are waiting for it to come, let us be careful not to put on one side all the stories in the life of the Poverello, which seem to us like the improvisations of fancy; like the one, I mean, where we are told how he went on the roof of a house built for his brethren and obliged them all to come up with him, and throw down the tiles and demolish the walls. This act, and all others where he shows a real horror of property — we see him for example rushing away from a cell because he heard it called *his* cell — these are not extravaganzas of conduct, they are all actions in perfect harmony with the general thought which inspired them.

When we read legends like these, we seem to be confronted with eccentricities, but they are really the most natural, the most coherent manifestations of an idea which is being turned into a reality. The study of the life of the great saint must be gone over again completely from this point of view. It will be found then that far from diminishing his personality, this historical investigation will exalt it. It will show in him a man who by the exercise of strenuous simplicity, grasped some of the ideas which we ought to get hold of now ourselves, if we want to answer some of the difficulties which are becoming more pressing day by day. Let us hope that some historian will be found endowed with enough philosophical and sociological ability to study calmly and independently the attitude towards property in St. Francis. He would perform an inestimable service to our time, showing how there arose in a strictly Christian soil, ideas which even modern Christians to-day do not yet recognize.

The exaltation of the Poverello would have a much stronger, much more significant, more efficacious effect upon us, if we could come into close quarters with his Catholicism, if we could come to realize it directly, at the point where it becomes a communion, where this communion would instinctively lead us to follow him as we recognize in him a master of our thought and of our life.

What I have just said is enough, I hope, to show you that in the mind of St. Francis the question of orthodoxy did not appear as a debatable point. Sometimes he was requested to make a profession of faith. It can be said without casting reflections on any one, that these ecclesiastical exhibitions are somewhat disagreeable. It is always unpleasant to have to exhibit one's passports. On his own part, St. Francis would never have thought of proclaiming his loyalty. For him it was something so deep, so natural, that to suspect that it could be questioned would have been impossible for him.

The Church was his spiritual home. He was thoroughly conscious that each stage in his own spiritual life had been marked by its impress. He had the feeling of progress, but he had also the feeling that the Church was awaiting him at each turn of the road to give him the will, the force, and also the programme for the new part of his journey. More than anyone he felt himself the son of a long-enduring education; but he was a son and not a slave. The Church was active, he was active too; his own activity peculiar to himself, was, in a way, the result of his noble energy. At every incident in his life we see him searching, struggling, suffering, waiting, watching, praying; but all of these words indicate types of effort closely related in a mutual harmony. He felt that the life of the past had to be found again in each one of us; had to be revived, in a way, in each one of us; and by this process to renew its vitality. Hence it comes that his Catholicism has a double character which seems to us paradoxical; on the contrary, it is the very condition of life. He was absolutely obedient, and yet he was perfectly free.

If we isolate either of these two factors we are untrue to the historic character of St. Francis. Those who tell us St.

Francis was obedient, are right; provided they recognize the character of his obedience; provided they show us how his obedience was not the passive abdication of his will. Those who tell us that St. Francis spoke frankly, that his actions and his will are plain, are right. His testament is one of the most thoroughly individualistic documents in the history of the Church. It is a protest in advance against all the hypocritical methods by which they wished to transform his character. It is the painful and indignant cry of a dying saint, who foresees those who will gloss his words, who anticipated the whole sickening race of counterfeiters concealed in the dark; men preparing to seize his name and secure through it for themselves a glorious renown, and are yet ready to sacrifice at the same time all that the name implies. Those who use this language are also right. When he was most troubled in spirit, he wrote, "After the Lord gave me the brethren, no one showed to me what I ought to do, but the Master Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the rule of the Holy Gospels.

Nothing is truer. And yet those who rely expressly on such pages and on others like them in the works of the saint, and set him up as a precursor of Protestantism, would make a great mistake. I know I have been reproached with this method myself. If I deserve the reproach, I regret it, and I shall try to repair my fault. Let us hope that the frankness with which I say *mea culpa*, will lead my estimable opponents to show the same good will. Let them stop thinking that they are greatly honoring St. Francis by representing him as a sort of passive instrument in the hands of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

The famous Innocent III was certainly no ordinary pontiff. Often his nights were troubled by terrible visions. It appeared to him that the Venerable Basilica of the Lateran, the head mother of all the Churches in the world, the symbol of the ecclesiastical establishment, was shaken to its foundations by terrible convulsions and threatened to fall in ruins. Do you think that then he repeated to himself that he was sole chief, the one Master? Do you think that because he believed that he had the plenitude of authority he also believed he ought to have the whole initiative, all the required enlightenment? Not a bit

of it. Innocent III never thought of meeting the threatening disaster through the administration of the Church. He saw a poor man before him in rags, without authority, without title, without mission; and after some hesitation, he understood that from this source, from this man who was not even a priest, would come the salvation of the Church.

The interviews of Francis of Assisi and of Innocent III, just as Giotto sketched them, will remain forever a living symbol of the way in which at the time of this great pontiff, the mission of ecclesiastical authority was understood. The voice which was heard in this little Umbrian village, may have been miserably weak and without prestige; it might have lacked all theological science; yet it was not stifled. It was not answered either by shrugs of the shoulders, nor by smiles of pity, nor by violent measures. It was listened to. There was delay, there was some hesitation; its truth was put to the test.

Go to Assisi and look at Giotto's frescoes; study the people about the Pope; look at their eyes, the expression of their lips which seem to say, "Why are you stopping, Most Holy Father, to listen to this importunate individual? What can he possibly know that we do not know? Show him the door. Have him shut up for fear that the weak may be seduced by his words. Listening to him will be an avowal on your part that you are less intelligent than he; we should all be done for, we who pass our life in protecting the Holy See. It will be the cruellest insult to us. Is it possible that you prefer to our views based on those of the Fathers, the extravaganzas of this chance prophet, this ignoramus, mad with pride? Be cautious of such novelties."

As a matter of fact, Innocent III did not listen to the majority of the Sacred College. On the contrary he gave heed to the words of this low and despised man. The documents say, "*vilis et despectus*," a man born in the Umbrian mountains. Undoubtedly, this act of humility performed by official authority, to another authority which did not contradict it, but occupied a far higher plane, the authority of holiness; this act, I repeat, is the one for which the Church should be most thankful to Innocent. Novelties, certainly there are novelties, many of them,

in the ideas of St. Francis, novelties so absolutely new that if they were repeated to-day, not like formulas learned by heart and deprived of their real sense through too frequent use, even to-day they would appear to many like dangerous dreams.

Forgetting myself, I have been talking to you more of Innocent III than of his humble adviser. Perhaps this is not a mistake, for after all the attitude of the saint depends partly on that of authority. If authority had kept its gates jealously closed or had only opened them to mute visitors coming to prostrate themselves and to listen in that attitude to the voice of an oracle, it is hard to see what would have been the use of the life of the Apostle of Poverty.

There are degrees in absolutism. Innocent III who was one of those who built up the theory of pontifical absolutism, did not believe that his plenitude of power should prevent him from listening.

In the age of Francis of Assisi, religious activity was thought of as a combination of forces, an association of wills, an effort of solidarity. In that age, they used to picture the Church under the form of a mystic bark with a pilot and officers, but each adult passenger in it had an oar and a certain responsibility. Each had not only the right but the duty of warning the rest of the ship's company if he saw danger on the horizon.

To-day all this has been changed for us; and the very remembrance of the *Navicella di San Pietro* tends to disappear. Last year it was possible to purchase at Paris tickets for Paradise. On them the Church was symbolized under the form of a railway train. To reach one's destination it was only necessary to get on the train and select one's class. The moment one was in the train, the destination could be reached without effort, without coöperation, just as a matter of necessity. We have here reduced to its simplest terms the conception of the Christian life, that is in absolute contradiction to that of Francis of Assisi. He believed in submission to the Church as I have just said. But his submission was active. It was more adhesion than submission, the adhesion of a son whose heart knows in advance that his father is right, who never contemplates obeying without understanding, and the last thing that would

occur to him would be to think of obedience in the dark as normal. He obeys, but he does not think that he is insulting his father if he acquaints him with his needs. Perhaps they are only some simple wants. He does not think that he is ungrateful if now and then he gives him solemn warning.

This foretold fact of perfect submission and of perfect liberty which to narrow minds seems so illogical, always appeals as a characteristic of the Poverello. If we understand this, we understand Francis of Assisi and the movement that comes from him. If we do not understand it, we not only do not understand Francis of Assisi, but also we do not understand the most original truth in the life of the Church.

The double action of the individual who gives up nothing, but who is never satisfied until the time when he can merge his personal work in the collective work of a social authority which accepts — but only after examination and test — the contribution made by the individual; this double effort, I repeat, is shown with especial clearness in the history of the journey of St. Francis to Rome to obtain approbation for his undertaking. "The Blessed Francis" — I am translating literally the narrative of the three companions — "the blessed Francis, seeing that God was increasing each day the number and worth of his brethren, and that they were twelve in number, all in full and deep agreement, said to the eleven, he the twelfth, their head and their father, 'I see, my brothers, that in His mercy, the good Lord wishes to increase our society. Let us, then, go to our good mother, the Church at Rome, and let us tell the sovereign pontiff the things which the Lord has already done through us. So that we can continue in virtue of His will and His orders what we have begun.' "

Is it not clear that here we have the spirit of the most perfect submission?

Turn over a few pages and you will find the spirit of the most intense liberty. Francis when at Rome had various experiences. Cardinal John of St. Paul, presented him to the Pope and the Pope blessed him. But it is plain that the blessing was given more to the individual than to his ideas; more to his intentions than to his programme. The pontiff was uncertain,

the rule seemed to him chimerical. He let the Poverello go, he wanted to wait for some new light before making up his mind.

Now what was Francis to do? Was he going to leave Rome and give up his idea? He wrestled in prayer, he sought for a solution, he went back to the Vatican prepared to speak with authority to him who was indeed the incarnation of all authority.

"Once upon a time," he said, "there was in the desert a poor and beautiful woman. A great king saw her and was smitten with her beauty. Thinking that she would be the mother of beautiful children, he wished to marry her. The marriage took place. Many children were born. When they grew up, the mother said to them, 'My children, do not be ashamed. For you are the sons of the king. Go to his court and he will give you all you need.'

"When they arrived at the king's palace, he wondered at their beauty, and seeing they were like him, he said, 'Whose children are ye?' They answered, that they were the children of the woman who lived in the desert; and the king embraced them with great joy saying: 'Have no fear, for you are my sons. If bastards are brought up at my table, all the more reason should you be, you who are my legitimate children.'

"My Holy Father," added St. Francis, "I am the poor woman whom the Lord loved, whom in His mercy he found beautiful, and through whom it was pleasing to him that legitimate children should be born. The King of Kings has told me that he will provide for all the children which I shall give him, for if he provides for bastards, certainly he must keep his legitimate children."

The translation which you have just heard, gentlemen, is quite literal. I should not have dared to place it before you in anything but its naïve simplicity. All the details of the parable may not be clear. But what is quite clear is that it can not be considered exactly a panegyric on those who surrounded Innocent III. Was I wrong in speaking of the liberty of St. Francis and in saying that he had a notion of obedience to the Church considerably different from that which many Catholics

have to-day? In this consists his own originality and the originality of all his real disciples.

Santa Clara never forgot that she was only a woman without authority in the Church. But she also never hesitated, woman as she was, to speak to the different popes who occupied the throne of Infallibility in succession with the same liberty as St. Francis. But you know, I hope, that scene, one of the finest pages in the woman's history—perhaps too fine and too great to have tempted painters and poets—where we behold Gregory IX coming with his court to visit the humble recluse of St. Damian to persuade her that it was her duty to accept a less severe rule than that of the Franciscans. We read how the humble woman kneeling before him who holds the "exalted keys," had the courage to say to him, "Absolve me from my sins, most holy father, but I have no desire to be dispensed from following Christ."

The gate of the convent closed. There was again silence around St. Damian's. The cool of the evening came down on Subasio as it did on other days. It softly encircled the olive trees and the cypresses. All was enveloped in it. But Santa Clara did not forget. She had resisted the affectionate thoughtfulness of the Pope. She felt that he had not been the victor.

Her rule, the rule given her by St. Francis was there. Authority admired it but did not approve of it. From that time the desire of obtaining for her rule a complete and definite confirmation became the great purpose of her life. We do not know her various steps; the details of her efforts. Ten years, twenty years passed by. From the retirement of her convent this woman follower of St. Francis, corresponded with anyone in the whole world who wished to follow the way of evangelical poverty. And she encouraged views which were anything but favored by official persons. Gregory IX died. Innocent IV succeeded him. He was no more disposed than his predecessors to approve the rule observed at St. Damian. He came to Assisi and he also visited Santa Clara. What took place? As to this we know nothing. We only know the result was that on the 9th of August, 1253, the rule was finally approved and that two days afterwards Santa Clara breathed her last.

She had accomplished her work. She died victorious, not victorious against any particular person, against Gregory IX, or Innocent IV or against authority; but victorious through them and through it.

And in this case also, you will find there two elements which make the Catholicism of Francis so original. Submission and liberty, liberty and submission. We are here very far removed certainly from the notion that the best way we can show reverence to authority is to turn our intelligence into a vacuum, to make our hearts empty so that what authority likes to pour in can be received.

Again I say it would be absurd to make St. Francis of Assisi a rebel or an unconscious Protestant. But it would be just as absurd to present him as a mere passive echo of authority, or as a man who had surrendered his own conscience. Often there comes out in his writings the idea that authority can make mistakes and that it ought to be withstood. But at the same time he adds, that even when obedience is refused, authority must not be forgotten nor cast aside.

People will say these are contradictions. Perhaps they are logical contradictions; but they are not serious and real contradictions, not contradictions in history, which, as it has been called, is God's logic. There are just the same contradictions which are found in family life, in national life, when quite naturally without thinking we allow authority to influence us, without however, giving up the practice of advising, correcting and transforming it.

This was the spirit in which the great contemporary Catholic, Newman, wrote in 1874.— Please note the date: "Conscience is in us," he says, "the aboriginal vicar of Christ, prophetic in its information, a monarch in its decrees, a priest in its benedictions and its anathemas. And if the eternal priesthood were ever to cease in the whole church, there would remain in conscience a sacerdotal principle and it will preserve its sway."

It is often said that legend is truer than history. And this statement is exact, provided we recognize that legend gives us bad information on subjects which it claims to tell. But it gives good information about the people who make the state-

ments. One of the most popular legends of the Middle Ages was that St. Francis was standing in his tomb, alive and ready to come out and take up his preaching and teaching. On the 12th of December, the pickaxe — not of criticism but the mason's — destroyed the old tradition. The Poverello was found there reduced to a skeleton; and yet the graceful legend is true. Francis of Assisi is not dead, for his work is not yet over. Somewhere or other he is concealed, perhaps very near us, and he is waiting to come out of his tomb and to commence his preaching again, that the times may be fulfilled. Gentlemen, they will be fulfilled of themselves, but perhaps it will be better to help in the task of fulfillment. The sturdy laborer who gets up before sunrise knows very well that he does not cause the sun to rise a moment sooner, but at least by doing so he will be ready to plow his furrow the moment the first rays are visible in the horizon.

If the sunrise finds us at work we shall understand the real secret of Francis of Assisi's genius, which will return, perhaps, quicker than we think, and reconcile submission and liberty, science and fate, and man, not only with his God, but with all creation. To him we owe that mysterious phrase which I hesitate to translate to you. For the translation would probably be feeble and perhaps altogether bad:

Sancta obedientia facit hominem subditum omnibus hominibus hujus mundi et non tantum hominibus, sed etiam bestiis et feris ut possint facere de eo quidquid voluerunt; quantum fuerit eis datum desuper a Domino.

Translated by W. LLOYD BEVAN.

New York.